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Mesquite pastor accused of West Virginia sex assault commits suicide

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Published: 22 May 2011 03:23 PM

Updated: 23 May 2011 12:18 AM

As a Sunday school class of children sang "Jesus Loves Me" down the hall, the congregation of Mesquite's Open Door Baptist Church huddled in the sanctuary and learned their senior pastor had hanged himself in a West Virginia jail cell.

The swift fall of Matthew D. Jarrell — "Brother Jarrell" — left the church in shock and mourning. A beloved pastor for seven years, the 41-year-old father of four was arrested on a sexual assault charge Thursday and pronounced dead just after 12:30 a.m. Sunday.

"All of us at our best are sinners," proclaimed youth minister Danny Reynolds, banging the pulpit several times during his morning sermon. Later he said, "It's not time to throw in the towel."

But in the pews, many wept. And later that morning, the church's interim leader appealed to the heavens to help his church through its suffering.

"We all need a little touch of God this morning," associate pastor Rik Parcell told his flock.

Some church members said they believed Jarrell, who lived on a ranch in Terrell, was in Pennsylvania last week for a Baptist convention. Instead he was near Charleston, W.Va., on Thursday morning when a sheriff's deputy pulled him over to ask about a brutal attack.

A 36-year-old woman had phoned police and told them she'd just escaped from a man who offered her a ride home from a bar, then drove her to a secluded area and sexually assaulted her.

Jarrell first denied but then later confessed to having sex with the woman, according to a criminal complaint. The Kanawha County Sheriff's Department said the pastor had another sexual assault charge pending from a 2007 incident in San Antonio.

Some members of Open Door, a church with several hundred members and a fixture on South Belt Line Road since the mid-'60s, said they never knew about the 2007 charge. Parcell said he knew but that Jarrell had given him a reasonable-sounding explanation, so he didn't do further research.

He said Jarrell was known to church members as a problem-solver. "He's helped nearly everyone in this church," Parcell said.

The new allegations and the suicide left the interim leader "dumbfounded," along with his congregation.

The church is going to keep moving forward, according to Parcell, and will search for a new pastor and support Jarrell's wife.

One sermon on Sunday was themed "what to do after your heart is broken," and while no sermon directly addressed the pastor's death or alleged crimes, they were surely on the minds of every worshipper.

"We want to honor Brother Jarrell and his family," said Joe Scott. "We're in grief mode right now."

Beside him, his wife, Tina, a member since 1977, was teary-eyed. "We're still going to go on as a church and heal and grow," she said.

And Vernon Allred, a member since 1996, called Jarrell's suicide "heartbreaking."

"But we loved him as a man," Allred said, "and we're going to go on as a church."

"We didn't worship him; we worship Jesus Christ."

Staff writer Avi Selk contributed to this report.

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